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ABSTRACT

Institutional Research is a new and fast growing field and those involved in it continually ponder their roles. When colleges were small, the president knew most things firsthand. With the growth of institutions and the increasing need for information, the institutional researcher has assumed the duty of investigating aspects of the college or university. Although it is neither a discipline nor a true interdisciplinary activity, it is learning the advantages of tapping the disciplines, sources of theory, personnel, and research methodology. Several signs indicate that institutional research is moving toward professionalization. Early formalization of institutional research as a discipline or a profession may, however, hamper its effectiveness. Institutional Research should be task-oriented and cooperative; a balance should be maintained between cooperation and specialization. (AF)

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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AS A DISCIPLINE OR FIELD OF STUDY[a]

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It is my task this morning to treat institutional research as a field or a discipline. Three definitions of institutional research are offered for consideration--none of which have universal acceptance in the field:

1. "studies which colleges and universities do about themselves--about their academic and management problems." (Brumbaugh).

2. "the analysis of the instructional process." (Ikenberry).

3. "fact-finding with no responsibility for modifying university instruction or administration." (University of Minnesota).

The authors of these definitions, all leaders in the field, have rather different emphases. At meeting after meeting of institutional researchers, the issue of what we are, our "identity-crisis", underlies much of the informal, if not the formal discussion. It is a common procedure for a new appointee as director of institutional research to send out a questionnaire to other members of his occupation to discover what he should be; the "is" becomes the "ought." We are a new, fast-growing field, perhaps on the verge of adolescence, with similar potential for becoming. But we ponder our roles almost interminably.

Perhaps a backward look will illustrate the reason why I believe that almost any specific definition of institutional research will not be acceptable to all members of our field, each of whom is a unique practitioner in a unique setting. When colleges were small, the President was able to answer, almost by first-hand observation, the many questions that occurred in his work. He knew students and faculty personally, he may have read a great share of the new library volumes, and he dealt with the institution in personal terms. As late as 1870, for example, the average college had less than 10 faculty and less than 100 students. But today's institution has brought with its greater size a complexity of operation with which only specialists can cope. The study of the operations and constituents of the institution is no exception to this increased specialization of the President's staff. It might even be said that the institutional researcher is an extension of that earlier President's personal sense of inquiry into aspects of his organization. As the number of administrative and staff specialists has grown, so have their information needs; institutional research is the attempt to meet those needs.

It can therefore be seen that when some of us say that institutional research is as wide in scope as the entire institution, there is no exaggeration in that statement. At particular times and places, however, the emphases will be formed by the pressures of context, thus accounting for the differences observed among specific offices of institutional research.

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How is institutional research related to the disciplines? Note that I imply that it is apart from the disciplines. The conventional meaning of a "discipline" appears to consist of two main elements--a substantial body of knowledge and distinguishable methodologies. We speak of the traditional disciplines of the social sciences, the humanities, mathematics, etc., and we have in mind branches of knowledge. Newer disciplines, such as bio-engineering, physical geography, or social psychology seem to be "convenience" relationships between two fields, neither of which is charged in the process of interfacing with the other. Although "interdisciplinary" research has been fashionable, in effect we have only teams of specialists who suffer communication handicaps due to differential jargon and varying theoretical postulations. Institutional research seems to be neither a discipline nor a true interdiciplinary activity--it has no recognized literature to reflect a body of knowledge and its methodologies are those of other fields.

But this conclusion must not be interpreted as saying that the relationship between institutional research and the disciplines is sterile. Institutional research is slowly learning the advantages of tapping the disciplines' rich source of theory, personnel and research methodology. Institutional research can provide to those in the disciplines a wealth of research topics, experimental subjects, and perhaps even financial support for research on institutional problems. In addition, through institutional research collaboration, the disciplines can make their own impact greater on their working environment.

Signs are appearing that institutional research is moving toward professionalization. After sharing these indicators with you I will comment on how I view the trends.

1. Institutional Research attempted to organize early in its existence, and persisted until in 1966, when a formal organization was created, the Association for Institutional Research.

2. One organization dominated the field--the Association for Institutional Research, which had 453 members just two years after its inception.

3. The shortage of institutional research personnel is critical because, like all professions, there is a desire to uphold standards for new members.

4. An intense interest exists in upgrading the occupation's image.

5. There is a growing belief, both within and outside the group, that institutional researchers have an esoteric set of skills and knowledge.

6. Unwritten principles seem to reflect the de facto code of ethics: studies should be free from bias and of high quality.

Although these trends seem likely to continue, the early formalization of institutional research as a discipline or a profession may hamper its effectiveness. Students of organizational change have found that specialists are often perceived as so expert that they are either misunderstood or distrusted. When the determining of the shape of a problem and its solution are both undertaken without the heavy involvement of those non-institutional research people who must implement the recommendations or deal with the findings, less than full implementation is likely. Task-oriented, cooperative inquiry is highly desirable; maintaining the balance between cooperation and specialization is of constant concern to the administrator of institutional research.